BOOKS

OFF THE SHELF

Open Minded

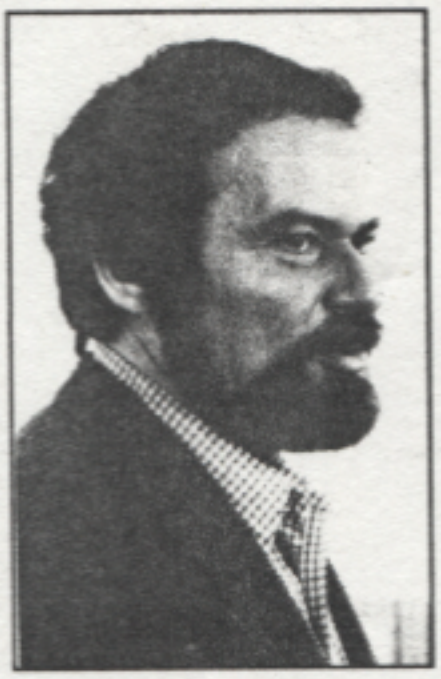
A Talk With Maurice Sendak

by Danny McCue

IN A TYPICAL ELEMENTARY school, his are likely to be the books read aloud to younger students.

The reader, teacher or librarian, hoping to ignite an interest in the wonder of literature in tiny minds, gives voice to a line or two, then turns the page to the children, in order for them to take in the illustrations.

What lingers in the mind of the child are images of rooms, much like their own rooms, coming alive with the vegetation of a forest, or becoming the entire panorama of a city. And if that book happens to be *Where The Wild Things Are*, the way the monsters in that distant place "roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth."



In all, Maurice Sendak has written and illustrated twenty children's books of his own, and illustrated another sixty. Now 62, he was recently awarded the first Empire State Award For Excellence In Literature For Young People, an award presented by the Youth Services section of the New York Library Association.

"I've never claimed to know what children like," said the illustrator during a recent telephone interview. "I seem to know, but that's through instinct more than anything else."

As both our conversation and the nature of his books attest, it's an instinct expressed through art more than prose. *Where The Wild Things Are*, arguably his most famous book, originally published in 1964, consists of only 385 words; his pictures, on the other hand, reveal volumes about the artist's sensitivity to the idyllic and not-so-idyllic in childhood.

Finding him at work in his Connecticut home, the object of our talk is to have him tell part of his own story—as much as the half hour asked for will allow, beginning with whether he prefers to illustrate his own words or the words of others.

"My own," he admits. "But I'm a slow writer, so at least in the old days, in between my books—waiting for them to cook, I illustrated other's books just to keep working.

"These days," Sendak continues, "I'm a stage designer, for operas and ballets, so I don't do it as much. [Now] when one of my own books gestates, I'll just stop whatever else I'm doing and do it."

Either way, the process, according to the illustrator, is pretty much the same.

"You listen to what the book is—hopefully you don't have a style to begin with, because that's lethal—you respond [as an artist] according to what the book's needs are.

"It really is instinctual; I don't predecide anything. It's a question of tuning in, catching the sounds of the book, so that I'm translating that graphically. That's difficult, but that's the fun of it."

What winds up rendered on paper, usually in tempra paint, pencil, black ink, or a mixture of all three, can frequently be categorized as the extraordinary grown out of the usual. Many of his books' imaginative leaps from his own experiences and thoughts as a child growing up in the Brooklyn of the 1930s and '40s.

"I wasn't your normal outdoorsy kid," Sendak remembers. "I spent my time reading, was not very athletic, and my father was very upset. He thought I should be out playing ball with the other kids."

Instead, Sendak sketched those kids from his bedroom window, some later finding a kind of anonymous immortality as characters in his books, and also found solace in the movies of the day. "Laurel and Hardy, Mickey Mouse, Busby Berkeley, King Kong, you name it," he recalls. "Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers...." And Walt Disney particularly.

"As a little boy growing up I wanted to be an animator before I know I had any artistic talent. He's still the best, I think. The liveliness of the graphics of the Mickey Mouse cartoons, they were tre-mendous. You can imagine, seeing them for the first time, how startling it was."

And yet, the inspirations for many of his best known books were something less larger than life. For *Where The Wild Things Are*, winner of the prestigious Caldecott Award (The Caldecott, named for the man considered the greatest illustrator of Victorian England, is awarded to the best illustrated book to be published in each year), Sendak has said he based the *Wild Things'* personalities on relatives who visited his parents' home every Sunday and seemed perpetually ready to eat his family out of house and home.

His *In The Night Kitchen* is based on an advertisement Sendak remembered from long ago for the Sunshine Bakers. Their motto was: "We Bake While You Sleep." The book's cityscape backdrop, on closer inspection, turns out to be packages and cartoons for everything from soup to nuts to soda crackers.

"The mundane is what intrigued me as a child," says Sendak. "But as a child I didn't know it was mundane, so in writing *In The Night Kitchen* I tried to treat it with the same respect and sense of beauty I felt for it as a child. I didn't condemn [that packaging] as advertising, because I didn't know that's what it was.

"And I think all the things in my books mostly do come from memories of my childhood, where I didn't judge them. I didn't know. That's why, when people talk about how bad television is, or comic books are—yes, probably, maybe—but since they fed me tremendously as an artist, I have trouble condemning them. Even crappy forms, because kids don't know they're crappy forms. There's something to take from there and store, and I've been able to use those things as a resource. So I'm not about to knock it."

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Which leads, in a round-about way, to asking Sendak for his opinion on the ever-present enthusiasm some people have for distinguishing between fine art and illustration, with illustration usually portrayed as a somewhat less worthy form.

"I remember there was an article about (the painter) Andrew Wyeth and the heading was: Andrew Wyeth: A Painter Or A Mere Illustrator. That said it all. There is that snob distinction, which is terrible because there is no difference between the two except for the variables of the particular talent you are discussing.

"I think there have been more great illustrators—and I say this cautiously—than there have been fine art painters in America. With somebody like Winslow Homer being one of the rare examples of someone having bridged both. And then there's someone like Van Gogh, who collected magazine and book illustrations because he adored them and developed motifs from them into paintings.

"There are commercial illustrators—I would say Norman Rockwell was, but even that is not a negative. He made his living from it, and whether you like him or not, technically he was superb. I'm not that kind of illustrator, but I also make my living from it. And I dare say painters, could they, would like to make their living from it, too."

Sendak then goes on to say, "I'm a children's book illustrator because that's what publishing houses call me. I don't call myself that. My books have things in them which seem to be inappropriate for adults: talking pigs, and little boys bathing in milk bowls naked, so they call that a children's book. Well, okay, they can call it whatever they want to call it—as long as it gets published."

Finally, he addresses a question of conjuring. Did he really think he'd go this far when he first started shopping his drawings around among Manhattan publishers?

"I didn't think I could, I just hoped I could," answers Sendak. "I had a brother who was artistic, but neither of my parents were; if I hadn't been successful at this, I suppose I would've been a bag man in Grand Central Station."

Looking towards his future he adds, "I want to do a little of everything. I like book illustrating, and I have two operas coming up, possible movies. I just like to do things a little different."

Sendak Forming National Children's Theater

Maurice Sendak and his friend, Arthur Yorinks are establishing a non-profit national children's theater, named the Night Kitchen. With the financial support of $1 million from HarperCollins, publishor of several Sendak books, they plan to commission plays, musicals, ballets and operas.

The HarperCollins grant is in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the publication of Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen*.

Originally planned as part of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in Utah, Sendak and Yorinks are more interested in collaborating with theaters around the country. The actress Sigourney Weaver is on the board.

The first production, planned for the 1992-93 season, probably will be a non-musical version of *Peter Pan*, adapted by Yorinks, with sets and costumes by Sendak. A Sendak-designed *Hansel & Gretel* could be next.

Sendak is also currently collaborating on a book of children's street songs and school rhymes.